

VIETNAM: A KOREAN PERSPECTIVE

Sam Moffett
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It must be admitted, first, that in general the Korean Christian approach to the Vietnam question is not on the theological but on the secular and pragmatic level. This should not be too surprising, however. Korea has felt the cutting edge of communist expansionism too recently to take a relaxed, philosophical approach to the problem. To Koreans, it is not theory but a matter of life and death. The most frequent rejoinder heard here, for example, to Japanese Christian attitudes on Vietnam is simply, "But they have never had to live under communism".

Feeling that any threat of further communist expansion is a direct threat to Korea's freedom, the country reacts accordingly. Even the opposition party's reluctance to increase Korean troop commitments to Vietnam is based not on opposition to the war but on the fact that pressure is increasing along Korea's own border and that therefore further dispatch of troops might weaken her own defenses. Under conditions of such tension, arguments against the war become strangely unconvincing, and the merest hint of American withdrawal sends shock waves through the country. The domino theory may not be convincing to the remotest dominos, but it is very real to those who stand exposed at the head of the line.

Let me therefore list first, and somewhat haphazardly some points of Korean disagreement with other positions and statements on Vietnam; then outline a few points of agreement; and finally comment on the Korean theological perspective as it affects the church's attitude here to Vietnam.

I. Points of Disagreement

Based on several years of listening to what I can pick up of Korean attitudes, let me suggest how a Korean Christian might react to some current statements abroad about Vietnam (and if these sound too much like my own reactions, I'll confess I cannot always distinguish between the two).

1. ("We oppose the war in Vietnam", says the Comm. of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, "because it destroys in one developing country what we have worked so hard to build up in others" - schools, bridges, hospitals etc.) Korea replies: Don't be so short-sighted. In the long run, the war in Vietnam may be the only guarantee that the smaller nations of Asia will be left free for development. What are schools without academic freedom? What is life without human dignity?

Korea owes its own social and economic development - so startling in the past five years - largely to the umbrella of security which the American presence has raised over East Asia.

2. ("But it is a myth", says a voice from Japan, "that American withdrawal from Vietnam would mean the victory of the forces of tyranny and aggression against the forces of freedom".) Korea replies: communist tyranny and aggression are no myth. We know. We have suffered under them. As for the forces of freedom, we are quite aware that freedom is far from pure in our "free Korea". But which is the more dangerous myth? That freedom must be defended against tyranny? Or that since freedom is never unadulterated, and tyranny is rarely total, we cannot distinguish between the two, and need do nothing.

3. ("We oppose the war in Vietnam because it undercuts democratic ideals", says the Comm. of Returned Volunteers.) Korea replies: And what, may we ask, does communism do to democratic ideals? Wars, at least, end. How many generations must we wait for communism to allow any measure of democratic self-determination?

4. ("America is supporting a military clique in Vietnam against a relatively popular movement for national unity", says Japan.) Korea replies: You may be right, but it doesn't look that way from here. The Vietnam government is military - that does not shock us in Asia in time of war - but at least it is legal and elected and internationally recognized. We cannot accept the oversimplification that the war is simply militarists against nationalists, nor do we think the Vietcong are quite as popular as you suggest. The only careful study yet made of the Vietcong¹ puts actual political support of the NLF at only 10%. Thich Tri Quant, the radical Buddhist who is no lover of America, when asked what he thought of the Vietcong, said, "People try to separate the North Vietnam communists and the South Vietnam communists. No such separation exists. They are both communists. And . . . as a religious man, the ideology they possess is much more dangerous than the guns they possess".² Shortly before his death, Bernard Fall, who found more and more support for Saigon the longer he stayed in Vietnam, conceded that the anti-communist segments of the population (Hoa Hao Buddhists, Cao Dai Buddhists, Catholics, montagnards, and "Vietnamized" Chinese) were a majority in the country.³ And more recently Howard M. Moffett listed ten dominant political forces in the Saigon orbit, and pointed out that to the peasant mind the popularity of one side or the other turns on such "unglamorous issues as determining who are the beggar thieves, ARVN soldiers who steal their chickens, or the Vietcong who tax a third of their rice crop".⁴

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1. See Douglas Pike, The Vietcong, and his article in The Reporter, Feb. 1966.
 2. Quoted by David Little in Reflections, vol. 64.1, Yale Divinity School.
 3. Vietnam Witness, p. 345.
 4. Howard M. Moffett, "Vietnam: Reporting the Cool-Medium War" in the Yale Alumni Magazine, October 1967.

5. ("We oppose the war in Vietnam because its anti-communist rhetoric obscures the fact that the basic division today is between rich and poor, not communist and non-communist", say the Volunteers). Korea replies: the rhetoric of the Volunteers, in turn, obscures the fact that this world is far more complex than they seem to realize. There are many divisions in the world, and the division between rich and poor is only one of them. It is either ignorance or wilful deception that tries to paint the incredibly complicated Vietnam situation in any two-tone pattern, whether it be that of rich against poor or communist against non-communist, and ignores the rest of the spectrum of division there: race, region, religion, city and country, kin and non-kin, educated and non-educated. But even at the isolated level of the division between rich and poor, Korea points out that the communists in Asia have been singularly less successful than non-communists in making poor countries richer.

6. ("We oppose the war in Vietnam because it renders difficult, if not impossible, domestic efforts to eliminate poverty and assure the civil rights of all U.S. citizens", say the Volunteers). Korea replies: that it is profoundly grateful that such Americans turned so isolationist and selfish after the Korea war and not before.

7. ("We oppose the war in Vietnam because it brings us closer to an all-out war with China or Russia ..") Korea argues: precisely the other way, that the U.S. action in Vietnam, by its carefully measured response to the communist tactic of guerrilla warfare, is the best insurance we have that the war will stay measured and limited.

II. Points of Agreement.

The above points of disagreement should not be allowed to obscure the fact that there are many, many points on which we in Korea would agree with those who oppose the war. I will mention only three:

1. We agree that war is agony and hell, and we long for peace. Koreans may take pride in their part in the war, feeling that they are repaying a debt to those who helped them in their own wars of liberation, and that their country is at last a mature member of the family of nations. Some may even secretly long for continuing war profits. But Korea's Christians pray earnestly and sincerely for peace. They know what war is like better than most Americans.

2. We agree that the problem of Vietnam is not going to be solved by military victory. The basic problems are social and political and personal. But we do disagree with those who assume that military withdrawal will make these problems any easier to solve.

3. We agree that no easy solution is likely to be found. Many in Korea are tempted to believe in a simplicistic solution by escalation and quick victory; and almost none by the equally simplicistic solution of withdrawal. But on reflection, most here will admit that some Korea-type compromise will have to be accepted. One area of difference is that we in Korea do not put much faith in negotiations with communists except from a position of strength, which will require continued military pressure.

III. Theological Assumptions.

As pointed out above, there is little discussion on a theological level of the issues in Vietnam here. There is, however, probably a theological consensus, conscious or not, which underlies the attitude of Korean Christians toward the war. In terms of the three classic Christian attitudes to war it could be described as follows:

1. A rejection of pacifism. This is due, in part, to the fact that Korean Christians have never thrown away their Old Testaments, and partly to their tacit acceptance of the Niebuhrean dictum: "Love without power leaves the world to power without love". An unfortunate corollary of this rejection is that rightly or wrongly they will not listen to pacifists telling them how to run a war.

2. A touch of the crusade spirit. Korea is far more vulnerable to this extreme than to the pacifist extreme. A holy war in defence of freedom against tyranny and conspiracy has a powerful, dramatic appeal. Church groups are easily stirred by reports of whole companies of Christians in the Korean divisions in Vietnam, and take pride in the fact that Korea's Commanding General in Vietnam is a Christian. They have no roots in Western church history with its sobering reminder of disillusionment with the crusade as the way to save the world.

3. A consensus that Vietnam is a just war. The Korean church is essentially Augustinian in its acceptance of the possibility that though war is always a tragedy, some wars may be justified. No amount of argument will ever convince them that the Korea war was unjustified, and despite all the differences between that war and Vietnam, which we recognize (see my editorial in P. esbyterian Outlook, "Korea and Vietnam: A Contrast"), Korean Christians are nevertheless satisfied that Vietnam also fulfills the classic conditions of a "just war". (See David Little, "Is the War in Vietnam Just?", Reflections, Yale Divinity School, N v. '66). The real question is no longer "Why?", but "How?".

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(Please bear in mind that these generalizations on what I label so dogmatically "Korea's reactions", are only generalizations, and it would not be hard to find Koreans who would take exception to them. They do, however, in sum, represent the vast majority of Korean opinion so far as I can find it.)